
The
SMIDGENS
UNITED

Books by David O'Connell

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The Revenge of the Invisible Giant

The Smidgens
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The Smidgens United

DAVID O'CONNELL

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To Jodie, Emily and Molly





1

Footprints

Gafferty Sprout leaned heavily against the base of the massive wall of ice and watched her breath eddy into wispy clouds. It had taken all her effort to descend the entirety of the sheer, frosted surface. Above her, Dad was following the path she'd already taken, his dark brown beetle coat standing out against the white ice. She waited nervously as he picked his way from one rough ledge to another, his big strong fingers cautiously searching for handholds.

'There are places Smidgens shouldn't go and this is one of them,' he muttered.

'There's a pin hook just to your left,' she called up to him. 'I left it there for you to hang on to.'

'Thank you kindly, daughter dearest,' Dad said, gritting his teeth and panting noisily as he reached for the little metal peg. 'What a pleasure it is to be honoured with your expert company on this little jaunt of ours.'

Gafferty grinned. The spider costume she wore – Hive Clan Smidgens always dressed as insects or creepy-crawlies – gave her confidence when climbing. She had gone first to test the ice's strength. Dad had grumbled uneasily, but it made sense as she was so much lighter than him. He was beginning to have faith in her judgement, allowing her to take risks. It was a new sensation for him, one she knew he hated almost as much as she relished her new sense of responsibility. She liked being trusted. It made her feel grown-up.

'There. That was *easy*.' He landed next to her with a soft thump, his broad feet flattening the finely powdered snow that lay around them as far as the eye could see. It was a desolate landscape littered with jagged ice slabs, surrounded by high silvery cliffs. A thin mist veiled the horizon. 'Just a short walk now.' Dad pointed to a low mound; its smooth sides shone white. 'Your mum spotted it yesterday on her scavenger trip but didn't have time to stop and investigate properly.'

They warily made their way over the frozen surface, careful to avoid any icy drifts that might hide a crevasse that could easily swallow them up. Gafferty couldn't resist throwing a quick snowball at her father when he wasn't looking.

'Keep your mind on the job, you giddy dream-bucket!' he scolded, brushing the ice from his jacket. Gafferty's face reddened in shame, then felt a sharp blow as a snowball landed on her cheek and exploded. 'And learn to throw,' Dad chuckled. 'Your old man's still a better shot than you, if nothing else.'

Soon they reached the foot of the mound. Dad pulled a metal blade from his coat and sank its point into the hill's surface. The ground split as he dragged the knife through it, a hole opening in the thin covering. Solid green globes, the size of one of Dad's hands, poured out and rolled over the ice at their feet.

'Buried treasure,' Dad said with satisfaction. 'Peas. And as cold as a ghost's kiss.'

Gafferty shivered. She'd had close contact with ghosts before. Not a kiss, mind you, but as near as she'd ever wanted to be. One of the few humans she'd encountered, the villainous Claudia Slymark, had kept ghosts as her servants to do her wicked commands. Gafferty suspected

she might meet them again but tried not to think about it too much.

'You wouldn't think it was the middle of the summer, would you?' she said instead. She peered up at the pale light far over their heads. She could almost imagine it as the winter sun and that they were wandering through some barren frozen wasteland, not stood at the bottom of a freezer in the frozen food aisle of McTavish's Supermarket, illuminated by a dull orange lamp hanging from grubby plastic ceiling tiles. Outside the shop the actual sun would just be rising, heralding the start of a long, warm day for both Smidgens and Big Folk alike.

Mum had discovered the Big Folk shopworkers were clearing out their huge freezers to defrost them, and an unnoticed bag of peas buried in the ice was a prime scavenger target. Climbing into the freezer had been tricky, especially for someone only seven centimetres tall, but it had given Gafferty another chance to prove herself to Dad.

She removed her backpack and took out a plastic bag lined with tinfoil. It would keep the peas cool until they could get them back home and into the cooking pot. She swiftly collected the vegetables and had just filled the bag when she saw them: tracks in the ice. No, footprints!

Smidgen-sized prints. They were some distance away, hugging the line of the freezer wall. She silently nudged Dad and pointed. He saw the prints and frowned, glancing quickly about to confirm they were alone as far as it was possible to see.

'Could they be Mum's?' whispered Gafferty.

'She didn't set foot in here. It's too dangerous for one of us by ourselves.'

They jogged over to take a closer look.

'See here!' said Dad, waving at a patch of flattened ice powder. There were broken pieces of solid ice lying around it. 'This is where they came in. It looks like they might have fallen at least part of the way.'

'Do you think there's more than one of them?'

'Possibly. It's difficult to tell, the way the ice has been trampled.'



'It's got to be the Burrow Clan!' said Gafferty. 'They've come back to the Big Folk town already. But why here?'

'There's one of the main Tangle routes nearby. Perhaps they're exploring the Smidgen tunnels and took a detour for food, and one of them has fallen in the freezer by accident.'

Gafferty frowned. She hadn't even known other Smidgens existed until a few months ago. Now she knew there were many of them, but their history was troubled. Of the three clans of Smidgens, the Burrow Clan were the most unfriendly, particularly after their precious Great Jewel was stolen by a Roost Clan Smidgen called Crumpeck before finding its way into Claudia's hands. Gafferty and her friends had been lumbered with the blame! All three clans – the Burrow, the Roost and Gafferty's own clan of the Hive – should have been working together, but Claudia had set them at odds with each other.

'I bet they're here to find and take back the Great Jewel,' she said.

'Whatever they're doing, we know one thing for certain.'

'What's that?'

'There are tracks in, but no tracks out, Gafferty. *They're still here* …'



2

Frozen Fools

'We should find them and talk to them,' she hissed as they ran back to their packs.

'No, we shouldn't.' Dad stuffed a few more peas into his rucksack before hurriedly slinging it over his back. 'There's a time and a place for having a nice chat with a cheese-and-pineapple kebab and a cup of berry juice. Stuck at the bottom of a deep freeze with a rat-riding, Burrow-bothering soldier is not it.'

'But it's a chance for us to make friends,' Gafferty persisted, but Dad was unmoved.

'Come on, Gafferty – let's get out of here. Staying safe is our priority now. What's Rule Two of the Smidgens?'

'*Don't do anything flipping stupid*.'

'Precisely.'

Gafferty knew better than to push Dad when there was a hint of thunder in his voice. They followed their own footprints back the way they had come. They had almost reached the base of the freezer wall when they heard a soft pattering from behind. Gafferty risked a glance. A rat galloped towards them, its breath steaming into clouds, with a fur-clad, bearded Smidgen astride its back. Gafferty grabbed her father's arm in alarm. As the rider neared, she could see his coat was torn and there were scratches on his face – Dad must have been right about the accidental fall into the freezer. The soldier carried a spear and scowled menacingly as his steed bore down on them.



'I guess he's not in the mood to talk after all,' Gafferty said as they both broke into a sprint.

'Told you so,' muttered Dad.

They scrambled up the wall of ice, using the footholds and handholds they had made on their way down. Dad shoved Gafferty up ahead of him, trying to shield her from any possible spear-throwing. Once she was in front, he kicked at the ice so that chunks broke away from it and fell on to the Burrow soldier below. The rat circled the ground beneath the escaping Smidgens, its nose twitching furiously as its rider considered what to do next.

'Can rats climb?' Gafferty asked between breaths.

'Yes. They're good climbers. Whether our friend here can hang on to its back at the same time is another question.'

'He's found the answer to that question already …'

The rat leaped up the wall, the rider clinging on to its fur tightly, all the time urging it onward with angry cries. Occasionally its paws slipped against the smooth surface as it tried to maintain its grip, but despite this, and the extra weight on its back, the creature made steady progress. Gafferty reached the top of the freezer and turned to see it gaining on them. She hurriedly grabbed Dad's hand and helped him up the last few steps.

They scampered along the edge of the freezer until they could go no further. A gap separated them from a neighbouring shelf that was laden with bottles of ice cream toppings, jars of sugar strands and chocolate buttons. It was only a narrow gap but the enormous drop to the floor below made Gafferty dizzy. There wasn't time to hesitate. They held hands and jumped together, then darted behind the display to catch their breath, listening to the scraping sounds of the rat valiantly clawing its way to the top of the freezer. It wasn't giving up.

'We can't let him follow us home,' said Dad. 'We need a plan. It's time for Rule Four.'

Rule Four: *if in doubt, make it up*. Gafferty scanned the shelf for something that could help them.

'Dad – maple syrup!' She pointed to a row of bottles of brown glossy liquid.

'A sticky solution for a sticky problem,' said Dad. 'Good thinking, Gafferty.'

Working together, they pushed one of the bottles clear of the rest.

'Heave!' At Dad's command they both shoved as hard as they could against the plastic container. It wobbled briefly, then fell on its side with a satisfying thud. 'We have to get the top off it somehow.'

'There's no time!' Gafferty pointed to the freezer. The rat had scrambled out and was tottering uneasily along the icy edge towards them, clearly determined not to make the same mistake twice and tumble into the frozen depths again. Its rider wore a smug smile. He was sure that he would catch his quarry now. There was no way two Smidgens on foot could outrun a rat!

Gafferty grabbed her knife from the bag. She raised the blade over her head, then plunged it into the bottle's side. The plastic split, and syrup oozed slowly from the break.

'That's not going to do much good,' said Dad. 'Hey, what are you doing now, girl?' Gafferty had jumped on to his back and was climbing on to his shoulders.

'Help me up!' she said. 'I'm going to make a bit of a splash!'

Dad stood steady as she balanced on his shoulders. Gafferty waited for the right moment – she had to time this precisely!

'Gafferty,' Dad growled. 'This had better work.'

'It will! Just a second more …'

The rat was almost upon them. They could practically feel the creature's whiskers tickling their faces when –

'Now!' Gafferty yelled as she launched herself into

the air, landing on the damaged bottle with her full weight. Syrup erupted from the split, exploding in the rat's face and bubbling out and over the shelf. The rat squealed in surprise. Dad belly-flopped on to the bottle beside his daughter, sending another surge of syrup over the rider and adding to the sticky brown slick that surrounded the rat. Rider and steed were stuck fast. The rat would have no choice but to lick its fur and paws clean and eat its way out of this very tasty trap. The rider howled with fury, raising his spear to throw at the enemy Smidgens who had outwitted him … but they had already vanished into the shadows.